DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 338 CG 018 918

AUTHOR Polkinghorne, Donald E.
TITLE Narrative Knowing and the Practicing Psychologist.
PUB DATE Aug 85
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (93rd, Los Angeles, CA, August 23-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Clinical Psychology; Cognitive Style; *Counseling Techniques; *Counselor Training; Higher Education; *Narration; *Psychology; Skill Development
IDENTIFIERS *Knowledge; *Narrative Text

ABSTRACT

Practicing psychologists use a variety of knowledge acquisition techniques and multiple knowledge structures when working with clients. Narrative knowing is one kind of knowledge, in which individual events are related by connecting them to a theme or a plot of which they are a part. Theme or plot is needed to unify the discrete events. A meaningful story is derived from a diversity of incidents. Narrative links individual actions into an overall theme. A practicing psychologist must approach a client from an integrative perspective. The psychologist assumes the client has made choices and can make future choices in order to change his life. People experience their selves in terms of a temporal concept, articulated in a narrative scheme. The practicing psychologist may find scientific methods limited in the help they can provide. The discipline of psychology needs to include the narrative format as a tool for practicing psychologists. (ABL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED267338

Narrative Knowing and the Practicing Psychologist

Donald E. Polkinghorne

Saybrook Institute

CG 018918

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Donald E. Polkinghorne

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Running head: NARRATIVE KNOWING

Abstract

Practicing psychologists use multiple knowledge structures in working with clients. Knowledge derived from relationships within a temporal schematic structure (narrative) is compared to knowledge derived from relationships between and among categorical structures (science). Using literature from the philosophy of history, the special characteristics of narrative knowing such as plot and narrative explanation are distinguished. Because knowledge of self and others is structured through narrative patterns in formats such as biography and case-history, the development of narrative knowing skills as well as scientific knowing skills is advocated in training programs for practicing psychologists.

NARRATIVE KNOWING AND THE PRACTICING PSYCHOLOGIST

Psychology has undergone a transformation in the last forty years. Before World War II it was a discipline whose members were housed primarily in universities as instructors and researchers, or secondarily in mental health settings as diagnostic testers. Now the majority of our graduate pursue careers outside the universities as providers of therapeutic services in their communities. I believe the move to non-university careers has bifurcated the criteria by which we evaluate the knowledge our discipline develops. In the university the primary criterion for acceptance of our efforts to develop knowledge was conformity to the highest standards of a unified science (Danzinger, 1979). We shared with our colleges in the other sciences the same lines of demarcation and standards of scientific excellence. The research courses and dissertation requirements in the training curriculum of practicing psychologists retain an emphasis on the stringent scientific limitations highly valued within the commitment to an unified science. Yet the knowledge produced through these methods is experienced by practitioners as lacking significance for carrying out their therapeutic tasks. Those psychologists now practicing in the community find the fund of knowledge developed by methods which meet the unified science standard not fully helpful in their practice. They are calling for the discipline to train them in knowledge formats that are more useful and are related to their therapeutic tasks. The strain placed on the discipline by the bifurcation in work settings and in consequent differing

criterion for judging the meaningfulness of proposed knowledge is well documented (Barlow, Hayes, and Nelson, 1984, and Howard, 1985).

I believe that the base of the distress over the lack of importance of the discipline's current research for psychological practice can be traced to our use of an overly narrow and delimited notion of what is knowledge. The word "science" has come to mean a specific subset of human knowledge, instead of the full complement of knowledge derived through the various kinds of knowing structures. The theme of this paper is that humans interact with one another and the world through a variety of knowledge forms, only one of which is "science" in the narrow sense. Practicing psychologists make use of the full cache of understandings they derive through various kinds of knowing. The type of knowledge encoded through a formal scientific format is limited in relevance to a narrow band of interaction with people, while knowledge organized through other formats, and in particular the story or narrative schema, inform a wide range of our personal and interpersonal understanding and interaction.

Kinds of Knowing

The next few paragraphs provide a quick overview of a variety of knowledge formats. Science and narrative will be located within the overview and then in the next section a more intensive description of the narrative knowledge format will be offered.

Knowledge is organized. Knowledge is not an enumeration of discontinuous facts, but a structuring of facts according to

particular patterns. Mandler (1984) has offered a description of four kinds of structures that organize particular bits of information into knowledge. She first describes the categorical or taxonomic knowledge structure. In this form of organization facts are related according a shared similarity of form, function or other aspect; for example, this kind of knowledge about an individual animal is created by locating it in a category, such as feline, through the size and shape it shares with other animals also known as members of the category "feline". A second kind of knowledge, related to categorical knowledge, is organized through a matrix structure and is characterized by class-intersection. Matrix knowledge is formed by overlaying several independent categories. For example, knowledge of an individual tiger or lion would be derived from the intersection of categories of which it is a member, such as ferocious and feline. A third pattern for organizing facts into knowledge is the serial structure. In a serial pattern knowledge of items is displayed by describing the connection of the items to one another along a unidirectional dimension. The letters of the alphabet and historical events listed in chronological order are forms of serially organized knowledge . The final kind of knowledge described by Mandler is schematically structured. Schematic knowledge is organized according to a part-whole configuration. For example, a window, door, ceiling and walls are known schematically as parts of a room and are related to one another through being part of a collection which together makes up a whole. By contrast, in categorical knowledge each entity is an

example of the class by which it is known, that is, from a categorical perspective a tiger is an example of the class of felines. In a schematic organization the entity is known through its participation in the collection, that is, the tiger is a part of the jungle scene, not an example of the scene. Events or entities can be known in various formats, that is, a particular tiger can be known as a member of the feline category and as part of the scene I am viewing. The four knowledge structures have different effects on the encoding and memory of the events or facts they organize into knowledge segments.

Science, defined narrowly, is a subset of the first kind of knowledge organization, categorical knowledge. It is a set of statements describing the regularities and relationships between or among various categories. Categories are organized either around prototypical examples or defining attributes (Rosch and Mervis, 1975). In a prototypically organized category particulars are included as they are like the exemplar, for example, objects that resemble a robin are known as birds. Categories organized around prototypes do not have sharply defined boundaries and thus it is not always determinate whether an object should or should not be included in the category. For example, penquins, albatrosses and ostriches are dissimilar enough from robins to be questionable for inclusion in the category of "bird." Because of the lack of clear inclusion-exclusion principles of naturally functioning prototype categories, scientific knowledge often requires the translation of prototypically organized categories into defining attribute

categories in which inclusion in the category is determined by a technical definition.

By using closed or operationalized definitions of categories, scientifically patterned knowledge can make use of the principles of relationship that are described by formal logic and its mathematical expressions. Relationships between quantities of categories can be described with the principles of logical validity which yield lawful explanations of past events and a foretelling of possible future interactions. Although authors in the history and philosophy of science have pointed to errors in the logical assumptions on which scientifically organized knowledge was thought to be grounded (see Polkinghorne, 1983), scientific knowing has retained the status as model for true knowledge.

Unlike science, which is a special kind of categorically based knowledge, narrative is a kind of schematic knowledge. Schematically structured knowledge can be related either spatially, as when collecting and coming to know the aspects as parts of a spatial whole, such as a room, or temporally, as when various events are linked together to make a story or narrative. The temporal schematic linking of events as narrative is the kind of knowing that is used to understand personal action and autobiography. It is the format people used to organize their understanding of each other as biographies and case-histories and thus is of particular importance to practicing psychologists in their work with clients.

The characteristic that differentiates serial from schematic knowing is that of a theme that configures and pulls together the parts into a relationship with a whole. In spatial schema the configuring whole is called a "scene", and in temporal schema the configuring whole is termed a "plot". In serial knowing of temporally occurring events, the events are merely arranged along a timeline of occurrence proceeding from earliest to latest event providing a listing or chronicle, but no theme or unifying notion. Temporal schematic knowledge organizes and gives meaning to individual events by collecting them on an unfolding time line as parts or episodes in a story. The events organized as narratives can be imaginary (the objects organized by categories can also be imaginary as with unicorns) such as fairy tales and fictional novels, or they can be real life events of biography and history.

Plot

Narrative knowing relates the individual events through connecting them to a theme or plot of which the events are parts. The plot functions to tie together a series of events into a whole by giving meaning to the individual events as they relate to the development and outcome of the entire story. Without the recognition of significance given by the plot, the individual events would stand as isolated occurrences without connection to other occurrences. Events would appear as discontinuous and separate not leading to or being connected to other events or to an end product.

A plot is able to weave together a complex of events into a single story. It is able to integrate physical laws, others' actions, the weighing of different means toward a goal, and personal decisions. Various threads of subplots can overlay one another as the story moves to a conclusion or end point. Plot is also able to take into account the context of events and attune the story to the unique and novel occurrence.

To order actions into a plot is to draw a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents. When events are collected into a story line, the meanings attached to them in isolation are transformed through the capacity for schematic knowing. By becoming an event in a plot, the act receives a broader meaning as a contribution to the development of the plot. A plot changes a listing or chronicle of acts into an intelligible whole. Ordering events into a plot draws a constellation out of the simple succession of events. The ordering is not, however, the imposition or a ready made plot structure on any set of events, but plots are derived by fitting the particular acts into a developing structure. The final plot emerges from a dialectic between the story thematization and the events. The plot continues to recognize the integrity of each event while seeking to grasp them together and configure them into a whole theme.

The construction of a plot which gives context to its events is the work of the human productive imagination. The imaginative construction of a plot is a dialectic activity between the proposed theme and the events. Not any plot can order any set of

events, but the plot emerges in a tacking procedure between events and plot formation. It is possible to develop several different plots to integrate the same set of events. The meaning of the individual events is changed as they are understood as parts of the different plots. The construction of plots is not entirely a rule-governed activity, but can be generative of unique and novel configurations. Cultural traditions include typical plots passed on as mythic stories such as Oedipus Rex and children's tales such as "Little Red Riding Hood." The ordering of events by linking them into a plot comes about through an intermixing of the cultural repertoire of sedimented stories and innovations. Individuals can have typical plots they use to order their own life events. For instance, a person can configure the events of his or her life as parts of a tragic plot in which the protagonist (him or herself) is defeated and cannot achieve the goals set forth. Another can typically interpret events of his or her life as a comedy in which the protagonist achieves the goal and is happy in the end. Thus two people can incorporate the same kind of life events into different types of stories and the meaning of these events will vary.

Narrative, drawing on the competence to understand individual actions, adds the connecting links between and among acts by placing them in a over riding theme. Narrative brings integration and signification to individual acts by fitting them into an order of meaning at the level of temporal wholes. Narrative provides an overall coherence to events and gives meaning to individual actions.

Narrative competence is gradually mastered by children between two and ten years old. Children learn "to produce and comprehend causally and temporally structured plots that are organized around a variety of themes and involve a myriad of characters" (Kemper, 1984, p. 99). They develop the capacity to tell whether a plot coheres and makes sense. This capacity functions in way analogous to that of being able to identify ill-formed sentences which do not conform to the syntactic rules. The notion of plot is used in everyday explanations given to others to explain our decisions and actions.

Explanation

Part of the power of the research model based on categorical knowledge is its capacity to abstract events from particular contexts and discover relationships that hold between and among all the objects in categories across their spatial and temporal occurrences. Thus, in principle one could go backward or forward in time without noticing a variation in the laws which described the system. In the scientific type of knowledge explanation is understood to be the location of a specific event within the lawlike relationship that holds between and among the categories of which the objects are members. Thus to the question "Why did he purchase life insurance?" the answer in a categorical explanation is "Because he is a white male, in the 40 to 50 age category, and those in this category are, in 70% of the cases, also in the category of people who buy life insurance."

However, temporal schematic ordering provides a different kind of explanation. The temporal explanation gives an answer to

the "Why did he do it?" by connecting a series of events in a causal nexus. The temporal explanation focuses on the events in an individual's life history that have an effect on a particular action, including projected future the goals the action is to achieve. The explanation allows for a complex of events, including reflective decisions, and consists in explaining an event by tracing its intrinsic relations to other events and locating it in its historical context. Narratives exhibit the relationships between events instead of demonstrating them. Narrative understanding is comprehending a complex event by seeing the whole in which the parts participate. Mink (1966), writing about the historian's work with narrative, says: "[The problem for the historian] becomes intelligible...if it is seen as an attempt to communicate his experience of seeing-things-together in the necessarily narrative style of one-thing-after-another" (p.188). Narrative explanation involves a special kind of understanding "which converts congeries of events into concatenations, and emphasizes and increases the scope of synoptic judgment in our reflection on experience" (p. 191).

Narration through plots does not lead to prediction of future events and thus is different from the categorical judgments that seek to subsume event under laws. The symmetry between explanation and prediction, characteristic of categorical science, is broken in narrative explanation. Narrative explanation clarifies the links between events that have occurred, and, in this sense, narrative explanation in retroactive.

When an event is said not to make sense, it is usually not that a person is unable to place it in a category of type, but there is difficulty in integrating the event into a plot whereby it is understandable in a context of what has gone before. If a person is asked why they have done something, the explanation they give is normally in the narrative mode instead of the categorical mode.

The Practicing Psychologist

The practicing psychologist works with all aspects of the person and must approach the person from an integrative perspective. The practicing psychologist also assumes and appeals to the possibility of the client making choices about his or her actions and that past troubling behavior can be changed, and part of the responsibility for this change lies with the client.

A theme of this essay is that people order and understand their own and other lives through narrative plots. The question of "Who am I?" is not answered in a primary sense through identifying the category to which one belongs, "I am an American," "I am a male," "I am a farmer," but through a narration of the sort "I was born in St. Louis and then I went to school which caused me to become interested in these things, et cetera." The experience of self is organized along the temporal dimension in the same manner as the narration of a plot concept organizes events into a unified story. The identity of self is primarily a temporal instead of categorical concept. In a real sense the person's identity is their story. The temporal order

in human experience is articulated through a narrative scheme, and the power of stories to explain comes from their link to this mode of human knowledge.

The practicing psychologist finds that the small segment of ordinary knowledge which is susceptible to purification through scientific methods is too limited to provide sufficient help if the other forms of knowledge are excluded. The whole range of knowledge structures is required in dealing with many of the problems he or she is called on to help

At the last APA Convention Brunner (1984) pointed out that psychology as a discipline had neglected the narrative mode of thinking as a sanctioned tool of understanding. He said that the narrative mode leads to "good stories, gripping drama and believable historical accounts" and that it deals in human action or human-like intention and action. He contrasted the narrative mode with the paradigmatic mode, or what is termed the categorical mode in this essay. He described the paradigmatic mode as leading to logical proof and theory which are negated by falisifiability, while the acceptance of a narrative account is based on its believability. Because trustworthy knowledge has been understood to be only possible through the application of rules of formal logic to categorically organized knowledge, psychology has paid little attention to developing and refining temporal schematic knowledge as tool for understanding persons. Other disciplines, especially history, have looked closely at this form of knowledge. They have come to describe with clarity its type of organization and power and limits of knowledge

organized with this pattern. We can heed the call of the practitioners of our discipline by attending to the epistemological and methodological changes implied by including the narrative format as an accepted knowledge tool for practicing psychologists.

References

Barlow, D. H., Hayes, S. C., & Nelson, R. O. (1984). *The scientist practitioner*. New York: Pergamon.

Danzinger, K. (1979). The Social Origins of Modern Psychology. In A. R. Buss (Ed.). *Psychology in social context* (pp. 27-45). New York: Irvington.

Howard, G. S. (1985). Can Research in the Human Sciences Become More Relevant to Practice? *Journal of Counseling and Development, 63,* 539-544

Kemper, S. (1984). The development of narrative skills: Explanations and Entertainments. In S. A. Kuczaj, II (Ed.) *Discourse Development*. New York: Springer-Verlag.

Mandler, J. M. (1984). *Stories, scripts, and scenes: Aspects of a schema theory*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Mink, L. O. (1966). The Autonomy of historical understanding. In W. H. Dray (Ed.) *Philosophical Analysis and History* (pp. 160-192). New York: Harper & Row.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1983). *Methodology for the human sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York

Rosch, E. & Mervis, C. B. (1975). Cognitive reference points. *Cognitive Psychology, 7,* 532-547.